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Build smaller dwellings in San Joaquin Valley, study says

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The San Joaquin Valley should sharply reduce its appetite for big homes on large lots to meet housing needs of empty-nesters and growing minorities, says a study released Wednesday.

Although apartments, town homes and condominiums make up 29 percent of the valley's housing stock, up to 45 percent of new homes in the next four decades should fit that category, the study says.

The market for regular houses on small lots also is growing, the document says. That conflicts with claims by the Building Industry Association of the Great Valley. Last week, a spokesman said market research suggests that 75 percent to 80 percent of buyers want low-density, detached, single-family houses.

"A Home for Everyone: San Joaquin Valley Housing Preferences and Opportunities to 2050" was released Wednesday by the Council of Infill Builders, a nonprofit group of real estate professionals. Its members stand to benefit from policies favoring higher-density housing.

The logic behind infill, or recycling lots within cities as opposed to urban-edge sprawl, is a key principle of smart growth. Infill can reduce driving and pollution and help preserve farmland, experts say.

The study relies on others, with a focus on housing trends and consumer preference surveys suggesting that business-as-usual subdivisions will not satisfy the valley's changing population.

For example, "new majority" Latinos, Asians, blacks and other nonwhites are much less likely to own homes, the study says.

Refusing to change the valley's addiction to sprawl "not only jeopardizes our agricultural economy, but as the study shows, it won't even provide the type of housing these new residents are likely to want," Amanda Eaken, deputy director of Sustainable Communities, said in a blog.

The study comes on the heels of another, released last week by the American Farmland Trust, predicting that 600,000 acres of farmland could be sacrificed to growth by 2050 if development patterns don't change.

The Council of Infill Builders commissioned this week's study by Arthur Nelson, a University of Utah planning professor. He also wrote a valleywide report downsizing long-term population and job projections throughout the valley's eight counties, approved last week by the Stanislaus Council of Governments.

More Latinos

Both studies predict the valley will add 3.2 million Latinos by 2050, while losing 892,000 non-Latino whites. Annually, that's 2.6 percent more Latinos and 2.4 percent fewer whites.

Both studies predict that a decline in homeownership since 2004 will continue for various reasons, including increased difficulty obtaining home loans and the fact that nonwhites are more likely to rent.

The infill study praised Turlock for new general plan policies calling for "a housing mix that looks substantially different from past patterns," with higher density and smaller lots.

Modesto got a shout-out, too, with the study quoting city planning manager Patrick Kelly saying, "The forces of change give rise to the importance of planning for future generations by expanding housing options and choices."

Infill prevails more often



ELIAS FUNEZ/efunez@modbee.com Construction workers inspect a townhome site at Carver and 9th Street Wednesday afternoon. - The Modesto Bee - Elias Funez

On Wednesday, Kelly said builders don't have to extend utilities at substantial cost when they choose to recycle lots within the city.

Debbie Whitmore, Turlock's deputy planning director, also was quoted in the study, which contained no comments by officials from the valley's other counties — San Joaquin, Merced, Madera, Fresno, Kings, Tulare and Kern.

With minor policy changes, nearly all growth through 2050 could be met by recycling strip centers and other nonresidential buildings in suburbs, along commercial corridors, the document says.

In an unrelated posting, the California Planning & Development Report last week said lawsuits challenging infill proposals under state environmental rules in the past 15 years were far less successful (31 percent) than those opposing sprawling projects on city fringes (55 percent).

Notable findings from the infill study:

- The valley's population is expected to grow three-quarters by 2050, while the rest of California could grow only one-quarter.
- About 44 percent of people in the valley would downsize if it meant driving less.
- Baby boomers are expected to unload their homes in record numbers from 2015 to 2040.
- With 1.18 million homes in 2010, the valley could add 695,971 by 2050, of which 193,594 should be apartment units and 121,778 town homes. Builders should add 380,600 small-lot houses in the same period, and zero on lots larger than 6,000 square feet.
- Two-thirds of people responding to previous polls support alternatives to driving alone, such as buses, better sidewalks, bike lanes and car-pooling. Latinos prefer such options at higher rates than whites.
- Latinos support farmland preservation in higher numbers.
- Latinos are much more likely (80 percent) than other races (50 percent) to choose high-density housing.
- The valley should add 90 million square feet of work space by 2020, or 1.2 times more than existed in 2010. The valley could recycle 900 million square feet and build 600 million square feet of nonresidential space by 2050.
- Structures occupy about 20 percent of valley land outside of downtowns, with the rest used for parking, storage and other purposes. "Smart parking designs" and compact land recycling could double that percentage.
- Redevelopment agencies, used heavily by cities and counties to recycle lots, were disbanded last year. But "the Legislature appears poised to re-establish the core functions of redevelopment" in other forms, the study says.
- Planners and other public officials "should be proactive in identifying those parcels that may become ripe for redevelopment."
- Gasoline could reach \$8 per gallon by 2020 and \$15 per gallon by 2030 if prices continue to rise at the rate they have in the past decade.

On the Net:

www.councilofinfillbuilders.org/resources/valley-housing.html

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